

"Iris" by the Goo Goo Dolls

Protea

Tui

"And I'd give up forever to touch you, 'cause I know that you feel me somehow."

The protea flower primarily symbolizes strength, courage, resilience, and transformation. Due to its ancient origins and diverse, hardy, and vibrant appearance, it represents embracing change, diversity, and standing tall amidst challenges. It is also associated with overcoming obstacles, royal beauty, and the South African national identity. Named after the Greek god Proteus, who could change his shape, As one of the oldest flower families on Earth, The Protea cynaroides (King Protea) is the national flower of South Africa, representing the beauty of the land and the nation's.

The days that followed the jasmine tea developed their own rhythm—slow and deliberate, like the unfurling of petals in hot water, like the gradual awakening of something that had been dormant for far too long.

Each morning, I found myself reaching for the purple box instead of the coffee maker I'd finally restocked. Not because the caffeine wasn't calling—it always called, that familiar siren song of bitter darkness that had fueled my days for years—but because something about the ritual had shifted. Something fundamental had changed in the architecture of my mornings, in the way I moved through those first quiet hours before the world demanded my attention.

The act of watching the compressed ball unfurl in hot water had become a kind of meditation. A moment of stillness before the chaos of the day. A private ceremony that no one else witnessed, that belonged only to me and the memory of the person who had given me this gift. I would fill the kettle—always the same kettle, the one with the slight whistle that my sister had left behind years ago. I would select the day's flower—carefully, deliberately, as if the choice mattered more than it reasonably should. I would place the small compressed sphere in my grandmother's teacup—the one with the faded blue pattern, the one that had crossed an ocean to reach me, the one that still smelled faintly of her garden when I held it close to my face.

And then I would wait.

The waiting was the point, I was beginning to understand. The waiting was where the magic happened—if magic was even the right word for something so simple, so natural, so inevitable. The hot water would touch the compressed ball, and for a moment, nothing would change. The dried leaves would sit there, stubborn and closed, refusing to acknowledge the transformation that was coming. And then—slowly, almost imperceptibly at first—the unfurling would begin.

A single petal would loosen from the mass. Then another. Then the whole structure would start to relax, to open, to remember the shape it had held before someone had compressed it into something small and transportable and easy to ignore. The leaves would spread like fingers reaching toward something just out of grasp. The flower at the center would emerge—white and delicate and impossibly perfect, as if it had been waiting all along for exactly this moment, exactly this water, exactly this witness.

I tried the chrysanthemum next. Then the osmanthus. Then the lily, which bloomed with particular drama, its petals spreading like a dancer's arms reaching toward an unseen partner.

Each one reminded me of Lego.

Each one made the ache in my chest a little harder to ignore.

The chrysanthemum was golden, bright, cheerful in a way that seemed almost aggressive—the color of sunshine forced into physical form, demanding to be noticed, refusing to fade into the background. That was Lego when he was working, I thought. That was the version of him that greeted customers and arranged flowers and smiled so hard it must have hurt sometimes. The performance of happiness, perfected through years of practice.

The osmanthus was subtler. Its fragrance reached me before its color did—sweet and haunting, the kind of scent that made you think of things you'd forgotten you remembered. Autumn evenings in the village. My grandmother's hands, always slightly rough from gardening. The particular quality of light just before sunset, when everything turned gold and precious and temporary. That was Lego when he thought no one was watching. The quieter version. The one that lived beneath the brightness.

And the lily—the lily was something else entirely. It bloomed with a drama that seemed almost excessive, petals unfurling in waves, each layer revealing another layer beneath, the whole flower opening like a confession you hadn't meant to make. The lily was what happened when Lego let his guard down completely. When the tears came, and the vulnerability showed, and you realized that all that sunshine had been covering something much more complex, much more fragile, much more human.

I was cataloging him, I realized. Using these flowers as a way to think about him without actually thinking about him. Translating my feelings into something I could observe from a distance, something that didn't require me to acknowledge the terrifying truth of what was happening in my chest. But the truth was there anyway, waiting patiently, like the flower in the compressed ball. Eventually, the hot water would come. Eventually, everything would unfurl.

The question was whether I would be brave enough to let it.

Thursday arrived with the particular gray light of the rainy season—clouds hanging low over the city, threatening to release their burden at any moment. The air was heavy, the kind of humidity that made everything feel slightly unreal. Like the world was holding its breath, waiting for something to break.

The studio felt different in this weather, more intimate somehow. The sounds from outside were muffled—the usual cacophony of traffic and voices and the endless mechanical heartbeat of Bangkok reduced to a distant murmur. The windows were streaked with condensation, droplets tracing patterns down the glass like the paths of tears on a face trying not to cry. The world had been reduced to this small space of ink and intention, this cocoon of creativity where the larger concerns of existence felt temporarily suspended.

I was working on the protea sketch again.

The protea. That impossible flower. That stubborn, beautiful, frustrating challenge that had consumed my waking hours for weeks now. Every time I thought I understood it, it revealed some new complexity—a texture I hadn't noticed, a shadow I hadn't accounted for, a way of catching light that made all my previous attempts look flat and lifeless. It was better now—not right, but better. I'd spent hours over the past few days studying every photograph I could find, watching videos of the flowers moving in wind, reading botanical descriptions that tried to capture in words what my hands couldn't yet capture in lines. I'd filled pages with partial studies—this petal, that angle, the way the leaves arranged themselves around the central cone. I'd dreamed about proteas, their shapes haunting my sleep, their colors bleeding into my unconscious mind.

The shape was closer. The proportions more accurate. But there was still something missing, some essential quality that eluded my pencil no matter how carefully I observed, no matter how many hours I devoted to the pursuit.

You need to see them, Yuki had said.

The words echoed in my mind like a refrain, like the chorus of a song I couldn't stop hearing, like the persistent drip of water from a faucet you can't quite tighten enough to silence.

Find them. However you can.

I stared at the sketch in front of me. The protea looked back—almost mocking, I thought. As if it knew exactly what I was missing and found my frustration amusing. As if it was waiting for me to figure out what it had known all along.

You can't draw a flower you've never touched. You can't capture life from a photograph. You can't understand something by keeping it at a distance.

Some things have to be experienced to be known.

Hong was at his station, working on flash designs for the exhibition that was consuming more and more of his attention these days. His silver hair fell across his face as he bent over his sketchbook, obscuring his expression, hiding whatever thoughts were moving behind those observant eyes. We hadn't talked much since the fight—not about anything real. Just the surface-level exchanges of people sharing a workspace, people who had wounded each other and then apologized and then retreated to safe distances: pass me that ink, your three o'clock is here, I'm ordering lunch if you want something.

The apology had been accepted. The tension had eased. But something had shifted between us, some awareness that we'd both seen parts of each other we usually kept hidden. Hong had witnessed my fear. I had witnessed his frustration. We'd held up mirrors to each other's blindness, and the reflections were still settling.

I looked at the protea again.

Then, before I could talk myself out of it, I pulled out my phone.

The message took twenty minutes to compose. Twenty minutes of typing and deleting, of second-guessing every word, of trying to find the perfect balance between casual and intentional, professional and personal. Twenty minutes of staring at a cursor that blinked accusingly, as if it knew I was stalling, as if it was counting the seconds I was wasting in pursuit of an impossible perfection.

What's the worst that could happen? I asked myself. And immediately, my brain supplied a list: rejection, humiliation, the confirmation that the distance I'd created was permanent, the loss of even the fragile connection that still existed between us.

But there was another list too. A longer one. The list of worst things that could happen if I didn't send the message. If I let my fear win again. If I continued to hide behind excuses and professionalism and the lie that I was protecting anyone by keeping my distance.

That list included dying without ever knowing what we could have been. That list included watching him move on, find someone else, build a life with someone who had been brave enough to reach for him. That list included becoming one of those old men who looked back on their lives and could only see the roads not taken, the chances not seized, the flowers never allowed to bloom.

What I finally sent was this:

Tui: Hey. I'm working on a design that includes some exotic flowers—protea, heliconia, bird of paradise. I've been struggling to capture them from photographs. I was wondering if you might have any of these at the shop? Or know where I could see real specimens? I could really use some expert guidance.

Professional. Reasonable. A colleague asking for help with a work problem.

Nothing about the way I'd been thinking about him constantly—his face appearing uninvited in quiet moments, his voice echoing in the silence of my apartment, his absence sitting beside me like a physical presence that refused to be ignored.

Nothing about the tea I drank every morning, watching flowers bloom and pretending I didn't know why they made my chest ache.

Nothing about the fear that coiled in my chest whenever I imagined actually seeing him again—the terror and the longing tangled together so tightly I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

The message showed as delivered. I watched the screen, holding my breath without meaning to. Then: read.

My heart performed a complicated maneuver, something between a leap and a stumble. He'd seen it. He was looking at my words right now, processing them, deciding how to respond. Right now, in this moment, some version of my future was being determined by a boy in a flower shop.

The typing indicator appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

I watched it like it was the most fascinating thing in the world. Like everything I'd ever wanted was contained in those three pulsing dots, those signs of activity that could lead anywhere, mean anything, deliver any verdict.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. In my fingertips. In the roots of my teeth.

Finally, the response:

Lego: Hi P'Tui! We actually have some protea in stock right now—we got a shipment for a wedding order and there are extras. Heliconia too! Not sure about bird of paradise but I can check with P'Dao. When do you want to come by?

Simple. Friendly. Nothing in the words that suggested he was still hurt, still avoiding me, still carrying the weight of whatever he'd overheard that terrible day.

But I noticed what was missing.

No heart emoji. Lego always used heart emojis—they scattered through his messages like flowers through a garden, little pink and red marks of affection that made every conversation feel warmer. Their absence was conspicuous. Their absence was a message in itself.

No excessive exclamation points. His enthusiasm usually expressed itself in punctuation—multiple marks at the end of sentences, as if one wasn't enough to contain his feelings. Here, there was restraint. Control. The careful calibration of someone who had learned to protect themselves.

No chatty additions about his day or questions about mine. No how have you been? or I was just thinking about you or any of the casual intimacies that had once peppered our conversations.

Lego's messages used to sparkle. They used to feel like little gifts, each one wrapped in brightness, each one making me smile even when I didn't want to admit it. This one was just... polite.

The distance I'd created was real. It had done its work. It had taught him to expect nothing, to protect himself, to meet my professionalism with professionalism in return.

I had done this. I had made this happen. And now I had to figure out how to undo it.

Tui: Whenever works for you. I know you're busy with school and work.

Lego: I'm at the shop tomorrow afternoon. Come by around 3?

Tui: I'll be there. Thank you.

Lego: No problem! See you then.

And that was it.

I stared at my phone for a long moment, trying to decode the subtext, the things not said, the temperature of the exchange. Was he okay? Was he angry? Was he just maintaining the professional distance I'd insisted on for so long, giving me exactly what I'd demanded even though it wasn't what I wanted anymore? I couldn't tell.

The uncertainty sat in my stomach like a stone, heavy and cold and impossible to ignore. Tomorrow. I would see him tomorrow. And whatever happened then—whatever I found when I walked into that shop—I would have to face it. No more hiding. No more excuses. No more pretending that distance was the same as safety.

"Stop staring at your phone like it's going to bite you."

Hong's voice made me jump, my hand jerking so hard I nearly dropped the device. He was watching me from his station, one eyebrow raised, his expression a mixture of amusement and concern. His pencil was still in his hand, but his attention had clearly left his sketchbook some time ago.

"I'm not—"

"You've been looking at the same screen for five minutes." He set down his pencil and stretched, his joints popping audibly in the quiet studio. "Did something happen?"

"I texted Lego."

The words came out before I could stop them, before I could construct a more casual explanation, before I could rebuild the walls that kept my private fears private. Hong's other eyebrow joined the first, both of them climbing toward his hairline in an expression of exaggerated surprise.

"You texted Lego," he repeated slowly, as if the words required careful examination. "Voluntarily. Without me having to threaten you."

"It's about the flowers. The design I'm working on. I need to see real specimens and he—"

"Right." Hong's voice was flat with disbelief, the single word containing multitudes of skepticism. "It's about the flowers."

"It is."

"And the fact that you've been checking your phone every thirty seconds for the past week has nothing to do with it."

I felt heat rise to my ears—the telltale flush that always betrayed me, the physical evidence of emotions I tried so hard to hide. I'd thought I was being subtle. I'd thought no one had noticed the way I reached for my phone at every pause, checking for messages that rarely came, hoping for something I couldn't even articulate.

"I haven't been—"

"You have." Hong stood and crossed to the coffee machine, starting to make himself an afternoon cup with movements that were deliberately casual, almost dismissive. "I wasn't going to say anything because you clearly needed to work through whatever was happening in that head of yours. But since you're apparently taking steps now, I'll just say: good. It's about time."

"It's just about the flowers."

"Sure it is." He pressed the button on the machine, the familiar gurgle of brewing filling the silence between us. "And I'm just a tattoo apprentice who doesn't notice when his mentor is pining so hard he forgets to eat lunch three days in a row."

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it again.

He wasn't wrong. I had forgotten lunch. Multiple times. I'd been too lost in thought,

too caught in the spiral of wanting and denying and wanting again. The protea sketch had become an excuse—a safe container for all the feelings I couldn't otherwise express, a way to think about Lego without actually thinking about Lego. A way to pour my longing into art instead of acknowledging that the longing existed at all.

My stomach chose that moment to growl audibly, as if to underscore Hong's point.

"I'm scared." I admitted.

The words surprised me as much as they surprised Hong. His hand paused on the coffee cup, his carefully constructed facade of casual indifference cracking slightly to reveal something softer underneath.

"I know." he said quietly.

"I don't know how to do this." The confession was spilling out now, unstoppable, like water through a crack in a dam. "How to want something without being terrified of what it might cost. How to let someone in without waiting for them to destroy me. How to be vulnerable without feeling like I'm handing someone a weapon they'll eventually use against me."

"Nobody knows how to do that." Hong brought his coffee back to his station and sat down, his gaze steady on mine, his expression stripped of its usual protective irony. "That's the whole point. You just... do it anyway. Scared and uncertain and hoping it works out."

"That sounds terrible."

"It is terrible." A small smile touched his lips—not mocking, but understanding. The smile of someone who knew exactly what I was going through because he was going through something similar himself. "It's also the only way anything good ever happens. Staying safe is just another word for staying stuck."

I thought about the jasmine tea. About the compressed ball that had looked like nothing—just a dried brown sphere, easy to overlook, easy to discard, easy to forget at the back of a cabinet. And how it had transformed into something beautiful when given the right conditions. When someone had been willing to add the water, to provide the heat, to wait for the blooming to happen.

Maybe that's what courage was. Not the absence of fear, but the willingness to bloom anyway. Not the elimination of risk, but the acceptance that some things were worth risking everything for.

Maybe courage was just fear that had decided to be brave anyway.

That night, I called my mother.

It was late—too late, really, for the kind of conversation I needed to have. The clock on my wall showed nearly midnight, which meant it was even later in her small village, where the rhythm of life was determined by sunrise and sunset rather than the arbitrary schedules of the city. But she answered on the third ring anyway, her voice warm with the particular concern of a parent who can sense when something is wrong, even across hundreds of miles of distance.

"Tui? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, Mae." I was sitting on my bed, phone pressed to my ear, staring at the ceiling. The darkness of my room was broken only by the faint glow of streetlights filtering through the curtains, painting shadows on the walls that shifted and moved like living things. "I just... wanted to hear your voice."

She was quiet for a moment, processing this. In the background, I could hear the familiar sounds of the village at night—insects singing their endless songs, a dog barking somewhere in the distance, the particular silence of a place where the stars were still visible, where the sky was still dark enough to contain mysteries.

"You sound tired," she said finally. "Are you sleeping enough? Eating properly?"

"Hong tells me I forget to eat lunch."

"That boy is good for you." I could hear her smile through the phone, could picture exactly how her face would look—the gentle crinkle around her eyes, the slight upturn of her lips, the expression of affection she wore whenever she talked about the people who took care of me in her absence. "You need someone to remind you that you're human, not just a machine that makes tattoos."

"Mae, can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

I closed my eyes, gathering courage from the darkness. The question had been building in me for days—maybe longer. Maybe it had been building since the first time I saw Lego, since the first time my heart did that strange thing in his presence, since the first moment I realized that my carefully constructed defenses were not as impenetrable as I'd believed.

"How did you know? With Dad. How did you know it was worth the risk?"

The silence stretched longer this time. I could imagine her face—the thoughtful expression she wore when considering important questions, the slight furrow between her brows, the way she would tilt her head slightly as if listening for wisdom from somewhere beyond the conversation.

"I didn't," she said finally. "I was terrified. My mother thought I was making a mistake—marrying someone from the city, someone whose family I barely knew,

someone who wanted to take me away from everything familiar." She paused, and I heard the creak of her old chair, the one she'd had since before I was born, the one that had held her through joy and grief and everything in between. "But I loved him. And the fear of never knowing what we could have been together was worse than the fear of it going wrong."

"But what if it had gone wrong?"

"Then I would have survived it." Her voice was gentle but firm, carrying the particular conviction of someone who had lived enough to know what they were talking about. "Heartbreak isn't death, Tui. It's just pain. And pain passes. What doesn't pass is the regret of never trying."

I thought about Est, crying in the studio. About his endless parade of romantic disasters, his persistent hope in the face of repeated disappointment, his stubborn refusal to let heartbreak make him stop reaching for love. I thought about my sister, rebuilding her life after her husband's betrayal. About the way she'd emerged from that devastation not weaker but stronger, not closed off but more carefully open, not bitter but wiser. About all the people I'd watched suffer for love and assumed that meant love was the enemy.

But they'd all survived, hadn't they? They'd hurt, and then they'd healed, and then they'd tried again. Because the alternative—the endless isolation I'd built around myself—wasn't actually safety. It was just a different kind of suffering, stretched out over longer time. A slow death instead of a quick wound. A gradual fading instead of a dramatic breaking.

"There's someone," I admitted. "Someone I care about. But I'm scared that I'll hurt them, or that they'll hurt me, or that it will all fall apart and I'll have ruined everything."

"Is this about the flower boy?"

I sat up abruptly, my heart lurching. "How do you—"

"You mentioned him in your last letter. Three times." I could hear her laughter now, warm and knowing and completely unsurprised by this revelation. "You never mention anyone three times unless they matter."

"Mae—"

"Tell me about him."

So I did.

I told her about Lego's smile—the way it seemed to light up entire rooms, the way it made even the grayest days feel brighter, the way it sometimes flickered at the edges with a sadness he tried so hard to hide. I told her about his flowers, and the

care he took with them, and the way he arranged beauty from raw materials as if it was the most natural thing in the world. I told her about the tea that bloomed like hope in hot water, about the gift I'd hidden at the back of my cabinet, about the mornings I'd started spending with jasmine and osmanthus and lily.

I told her about—the weight of him in my arms, the sound of his sobs against my shoulder, the terror I'd felt at seeing him hurt and the fierce protectiveness that had surged through me in response. I told her about the vulnerability he'd shown, the trust he'd offered, the way he'd let me take care of him without demanding anything in return.

I told her about the fight with Hong, about the message I'd sent, about the meeting scheduled for tomorrow afternoon.

I told her everything.

And when I finished, she was quiet for a long moment—the kind of quiet that meant she was thinking, considering, preparing to say something important.

"You know what your problem is?" she said finally.

"What?"

"You think love is about not getting hurt. But it's not." I heard her shift, the creak of her old chair, the rustle of fabric as she settled into a more comfortable position for delivering wisdom. "Love is about deciding someone is worth the hurt. Worth the risk. Worth all the ways it might go wrong, because the ways it might go right are too precious to give up."

"That's terrifying."

"Of course it is." Her voice softened, becoming the voice of my childhood, the voice that had comforted me through nightmares and failures and all the small heartbreaks of growing up. "But you've never been a coward, Don't start now."

We talked for another hour after that—about the village, about her garden, about the new grandchild my aunt was expecting. Normal things. Family things. The kind of conversation that reminded me where I came from and who I was beneath all the fear, beneath all the defenses, beneath all the walls I'd built to keep the world at a safe distance.

When I finally hung up, the clock read past midnight. But I felt lighter somehow. Clearer. Like someone had opened a window in a stuffy room and let the fresh air in.

Tomorrow, I would go to the flower shop.

Tomorrow, I would see Lego.

And whatever happened after that—I would survive it.

The Flower Shop

The bell above the door chimed as I entered. Three o'clock on a Friday afternoon. The shop was quieter than I'd expected—just one customer browsing the orchids near the window, her fingers trailing absently over the petals as she considered her options, and P'Dao arranging something complicated near the back register, her hands moving with the unconscious expertise of someone who had been doing this work for decades.

And Lego.

He was standing behind the main counter, sorting through a delivery of roses, his hands moving with practiced efficiency among the thorns. His hair was different again—shorter than I'd seen it, the extensions gone, his natural dark waves pulled back with a simple clip that caught the light when he moved. He was wearing an apron over a soft green sweater that made his skin look warm, and there was a smudge of dirt on his cheek that he probably didn't know about.

He looked beautiful.

The thought arrived before I could censor it, honest and overwhelming and completely undeniable. He looked beautiful in the way that real things were beautiful—imperfect and authentic and exactly, precisely himself. No performance. No costume. Just Lego, standing among flowers, doing work he was good at.

He looked up when the bell rang.

Our eyes met.

Time did something strange—stretching, compressing, folding in on itself like a letter being sealed. The moment lasted forever and no time at all. I saw everything in his face: surprise, wariness, hope trying not to expect too much, pain that hadn't fully healed. The whole history of what had passed between us, written in the flicker of his expression.

Something shifted in him—a decision being made, a mask being chosen—and his professional smile slid into place.

"P'Tui! You came."

"I said I would."

"Right. Of course." He set down the roses and wiped his hands on his apron, a nervous gesture I'd seen him make before. His fingers were trembling slightly, I noticed. Or maybe I was imagining it. Maybe I was seeing what I wanted to see. "The protea are in the back. Let me just—P'Dao, can you watch the counter for a

minute?"

The older woman waved him off without looking up from her arrangement.

"Follow me." Lego said.

I followed.

The back of the shop was a different world—less showroom, more workspace. Buckets of flowers waiting to be arranged, their stems submerged in water that caught the light. Boxes of supplies stacked against walls, labeled in handwriting I recognized as Lego's. A large cooler humming in the corner, its glass doors revealing rows of delicate blooms preserved at optimal temperature, waiting for their moment to become something more than raw materials.

And the greenhouse.

I'd forgotten about the greenhouse. The same one that had reminded me so sharply of home the first time I visited, the one that smelled like soil and growth and the particular freshness of living things. The one where my grandmother's spirit had seemed to hover just beyond the edge of perception, approving of this place, recognizing it as kin.

"In here." Lego said, pushing open the door.

The air changed immediately.

Warmer. Damper. Alive.

The humidity wrapped around me like an embrace, carrying scents that made my chest ache with recognition—earth and green growth and the particular sweetness of flowers in their prime. This was the smell of my childhood. The smell of my grandmother's garden. The smell of a world where living things grew because someone cared enough to tend them.

I stepped through and stopped.

The greenhouse was fuller than I remembered—plants everywhere, cascading from shelves and climbing trellises and spilling from pots on every available surface. Green in a hundred shades, from the pale almost-yellow of new growth to the deep almost-black of leaves that had been absorbing light for years. Flowers spotted throughout like jewels in a crown, their colors impossible and perfect. But what caught my attention were the flowers arranged on a work table near the center.

Protea.

Real ones.

They were larger than I'd imagined from the photographs—substantial and

commanding, the kind of flowers that demanded to be the center of attention. More textured than I'd imagined too, the cone-shaped heads covered in delicate, feathery petals that seemed to shimmer when the light caught them at certain angles. Colors I couldn't have imagined from flat images—not just pink, but shades of coral and cream and deep burgundy, all existing on the same bloom, all blending into each other in gradients that defied simple description.

Beside them, heliconia—those dramatic claw-like blooms in shades of red and orange that I'd struggled to capture on paper. And bird of paradise, elegant and alien, their purple and orange petals arranged like the wings of something about to take flight.

"I pulled everything I could find," Lego said behind me. His voice was steady, professional, but I could hear the effort it took to maintain that steadiness. "The protea are from a supplier in Chiang Mai—they grow well in the mountains there. The heliconia are local. The bird of paradise I had to special order, but P'Dao said we can keep them as display pieces after you're done studying them."

I couldn't speak.

The flowers were overwhelming, yes—more beautiful in person than any photograph could capture, more complex than I'd imagined, more alive. But that wasn't why my throat had closed up. That wasn't why my eyes were stinging with something that might have been tears if I'd been willing to let them fall.

He'd done this for me. He'd gathered these flowers, arranged them, prepared this space—all for me. After everything I'd done to push him away. After all the distance I'd created between us. After the words he'd overheard, the hurt I'd caused, the weeks of professional politeness that had replaced the warmth we'd once shared. He'd still done this.

I stepped closer to the table, reaching out to touch one of the protea—gently, reverently, the way you'd touch something sacred. The way you'd touch something you didn't quite believe was real. The petals were softer than I'd expected. Velvety. They yielded slightly under my fingertips, then sprang back, resilient. This was a flower that had learned to survive in harsh conditions, I remembered from my research. That had evolved to thrive in places where other flowers couldn't grow. That had developed this impossible beauty precisely because of the challenges it faced.

Like someone else I knew.

"You can pick them up if you want," Lego said. "Move them around. Look at them from different angles. That's the whole point, right?"

I lifted the protea, turning it slowly in my hands. The weight of it was substantial—this was a flower that demanded attention, that announced its presence rather than

fading into the background. The texture changed as I rotated it—some petals were smooth, others had a slight roughness that would catch the light differently. The color shifted too, revealing new shades I hadn't noticed at first glance.

"This is..." I started, then stopped. The words felt inadequate. Every word I knew felt inadequate for what I was experiencing—the beauty of the flower, the ache in my chest, the overwhelming awareness of Lego standing just behind me.

"They're beautiful, right?" Lego's voice was softer now, losing some of its professional distance. He moved to stand beside me, looking at the flowers rather than at me, giving us both the safety of a shared focus. "I love the protea. They look almost alien—like something that shouldn't exist on Earth. But they do. They just... survive in places where other flowers can't."

I looked at him over the flower. His eyes were on the blooms, not on me, and there was something wistful in his expression. Something that spoke of personal experience, of knowing what it meant to survive in places where survival wasn't supposed to be possible.

"Lego—"

"I should let you work." He stepped back, the professional mask sliding back into place—smooth and polished and completely impenetrable. "Take as long as you need. I'll be up front if you have any questions."

"Wait."

He paused at the greenhouse door, his hand on the frame. His back was to me, but I could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he was bracing himself for whatever I was going to say.

"Can you stay?" The words came out rougher than I intended, more desperate. "I mean—if you have time. You know these flowers better than I do. You could tell me about them. How they grow. What makes them unique. The things that photographs can't show."

Lego hesitated. I could see the calculation happening behind his eyes—the weighing of options, the assessment of risk. The debate between self-protection and something else, something he wanted but was afraid to reach for.

"Please." I added. The word was almost a whisper. Something in my voice must have gotten through. His shoulders relaxed slightly, the tension draining from his frame. When he turned back to face me, his expression was softer—still guarded, still careful, but no longer closed.

"Okay," he said quietly. "I can stay for a while."

He came back to the table, standing on the opposite side from me, the flowers

arranged between us like a barrier. Or maybe like a bridge. Maybe like a language we could speak when our own words kept failing.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

"Everything, Start at the beginning."

So he did. He told me about protea—how they grew wild in South Africa, in soil so poor that other plants couldn't survive, how they'd evolved to thrive in conditions that would kill their competitors. How they were named after the Greek god Proteus who could change his shape at will, because the family contained so many different forms and varieties. How they represented transformation and courage—the courage to be different, to bloom in unlikely places, to insist on beauty where beauty wasn't expected.

He told me about heliconia—tropical plants that attracted hummingbirds, their bright colors evolved to be visible from great distances. How the flowers weren't really flowers at all, but modified leaves that protected the true blooms hidden inside. How they could grow to enormous sizes in the right conditions, becoming vertical gardens unto themselves.

He told me about bird of paradise—how the flowers were actually the plant's way of attracting pollinators, how they only bloomed under specific conditions, how patience was required to coax them into revealing their beauty. How they'd been named because their shape reminded early botanists of exotic birds from distant lands.

I drew as he talked.

My sketchbook was open on the table, pencil moving almost automatically as I captured shapes and textures and the particular way light fell across each bloom. The protea that had frustrated me for weeks began to take form—not perfect, not finished, but alive in a way my earlier attempts hadn't been. Each line now informed by touch, by direct observation, by the sound of Lego's voice explaining the secrets that only intimate knowledge could reveal.

"You're really good at that."

I looked up. Lego was watching my hand move, his expression open and curious in a way I hadn't seen since before. The professional distance had faded somewhere in the telling, replaced by genuine interest, genuine engagement.

"I've been practicing this one for weeks," I admitted. "It never looked right. Something was always missing."

"What was missing?"

"This." I gestured at the flowers, at him, at the greenhouse around us. "The reality

of it. You can't capture something you've never touched. You can't know something you've only seen in photographs."

Lego was quiet for a moment, considering this.

"P'Hong said something like that once," he said finally. "About art. About how the best work comes from experience, not just imagination. You have to live it before you can create it."

"He's not wrong."

"He's usually not." A ghost of a smile touched Lego's lips—the first real smile I'd seen from him today, small but genuine. "Even when I want him to be."

The silence stretched between us—not uncomfortable, but heavy with things unsaid. I could feel the questions hovering in the air, the conversations we should have had weeks ago but kept avoiding. The words that needed to be spoken before anything else could happen.

"Lego." I started.

"P'Tui." he said at the same time.

We both stopped. Laughed awkwardly. The tension broke slightly, like ice beginning to crack.

"You first." Lego said.

I set down my pencil.

"I need to apologize," I said. "For what you heard. That day at the studio."

Lego's expression flickered—pain, quickly suppressed, but not quickly enough. I saw it. I had caused it.

"I don't know what you—"

"You heard me call you a kid." The words came out blunt, unpolished, nothing like the careful speech I'd rehearsed in my head for days. "You heard me making excuses for why I couldn't—why I thought it was wrong to feel what I feel about you."

He didn't deny it.

"I wasn't trying to listen," he said quietly. "I came to deliver the flowers and I just... I heard, and I stopped. And then I couldn't stop listening. And then I couldn't stay."

"I know. And I'm sorry. Not just for what I said, but for all the months before that. All the times I pushed you away. All the distance I put between us because I was too

scared to let you close."

Lego's eyes were bright now—not with tears, exactly, but with something that looked like hope trying not to expect too much. The dangerous, fragile hope of someone who had been hurt before and wasn't sure they could survive being hurt again.

"Scared of what?"

The question deserved honesty. Even if honesty felt like peeling off my own skin.

"Scared of wanting something I might lose. Scared of hurting you, or being hurt by you. Scared of turning into—" I stopped, the old wound pulsing. "Scared of becoming someone who damages the people I love."

"P'Tui..."

"I've been telling myself that love only ruins things. That the safest thing I can do is keep everyone at arm's length, never let anyone in, never risk the devastation I've watched happen to everyone around me." I forced myself to meet his eyes, to let him see the truth even though it terrified me. "But that's not safety. It's just loneliness that I've convinced myself is a choice."

The greenhouse was very quiet. The afternoon light filtered through the glass panels, turning everything golden and soft. The plants around us seemed to lean in, as if they too were waiting to hear what would happen next.

"What changed?" Lego asked.

I thought about the jasmine tea. About my mother's voice on the phone. About Hong's words: staying safe is just another word for staying stuck. About all the mornings I'd spent watching flowers bloom and pretending I didn't understand what they were trying to teach me.

"I realized I was more scared of never knowing what we could be than I was of it going wrong."

Lego's breath caught audibly.

"What does that mean?"

"It means—" I reached across the table, across the protea and heliconia and bird of paradise, and took his hand. His fingers were cool from handling the flowers, trembling slightly in my grip.

"It means I want to try," I said. "If you'll let me. It means I want to stop running from this—from you—and actually see what happens when I'm brave enough to stay."

Lego stared at our joined hands. His expression was unreadable—too many

emotions moving across his face too quickly for me to identify any single one.

"You called me a kid." he said, his voice small.

"I know. And I was wrong. You're not a kid—you're one of the strongest people I've ever met. You've survived things that would have broken most people, and you came out of it still kind, still warm, still capable of bringing flowers to people who are struggling." I squeezed his hand. "I was the one being childish. Hiding behind logic because I was too scared to face what I actually felt."

"What do you actually feel?"

The question hung in the air between us.

I let go of his hand—just long enough to walk around the table, closing the distance between us. He watched me come, his eyes wide, his breath shallow, his whole body very still.

"I feel like you're the first person in years who's made me want to be brave," I said. "I feel like every morning when I drink the tea you gave me, I think about you. I feel like when you smile, something in my chest does a thing it's not supposed to do. I feel like I want to know everything about you—what makes you laugh, what makes you cry, what you dream about when you let yourself dream."

I was close enough now to see the individual lashes framing his eyes, the slight part of his lips, the way his pulse was beating visibly in his throat.

"I feel like I want to kiss you," I admitted. "And I'm terrified. But I'm more terrified of never doing it."

Lego's exhale was shaky. "P'Tui—"

"You don't have to say anything. You don't have to decide anything right now. I just—I needed you to know. That you weren't wrong. That I do—that I have—"

I couldn't finish the sentence.

Lego finished it for me.

His hands came up to frame my face—cool and gentle and trembling. His eyes searched mine for a long moment, looking for something. Whatever he found must have satisfied him, because his expression shifted from uncertainty to something softer. Something that looked almost like joy.

"You're an idiot." he said.

"I know."

"You made me cry."

"I know. I'm so sorry."

"I thought—" His voice cracked. "I thought you saw me as a child. Someone who couldn't possibly understand what you'd been through. Someone too young, too naive, too—"

"I was projecting my own fears onto you. That wasn't about you. It was never about you."

"Then what was it about?"

"It was about me being too scared to believe that someone like you could actually want someone like me."

Lego laughed then—a surprised, wet sound, caught between tears and joy.

"Someone like me," he repeated. "P'Tui, I've wanted you since the first time I saw you. Since Hong dragged you into the shop and you looked around like you'd never seen flowers before. Since you stood in this greenhouse and got that look on your face—the one you get when you're thinking about your family."

"You noticed that?"

"I notice everything about you." His thumbs brushed my cheekbones, gentle and deliberate. "That's what happens when you're in love with someone. You can't stop noticing."

The word hung between us.

Love.

"You—" I started.

"Don't make me say it again." Lego's cheeks were pink now, his blush spreading down his neck. "Not when you haven't even kissed me yet."

That was all the invitation I needed.

I leaned in, closing the last distance between us, and pressed my lips to his. It wasn't a perfect kiss. We were both too nervous for perfect—teeth bumping slightly, noses needing adjustment, the awkwardness of first contact between two people who had waited too long for this moment. But it was real. It was honest. It was everything I'd been too scared to reach for, finally held in my hands.

Lego tasted like mint and strawberries. His lips were soft. When he made a small sound against my mouth—halfway between a sigh and a sob—I felt it reverberate through my entire body, felt it settle somewhere deep in my chest where it would live forever.

We pulled apart after a long moment, breathing hard.

"Okay," Lego said, his voice unsteady. "That was—okay."

"Just okay?"

"Shut up." But he was smiling, that real smile I'd missed so much, the one that lit up his whole face. "I'm processing."

"Take your time."

"I don't want to take my time." His fingers curled in my shirt, pulling me closer. "I've been waiting months for this. I've been waiting and hoping and pretending I wasn't dying inside every time you treated me like a stranger."

"I'll make it up to you."

"You'd better."

I kissed him again—longer this time, deeper, more certain. His arms wrapped around my neck. My hands found his waist. The protea and heliconia surrounded us like witnesses, their unlikely beauty a testament to what could grow when conditions were right, when someone was brave enough to add the water, when patience and courage and hope all came together at the same moment.

When we finally separated, both of us breathing hard, the light had shifted. Late afternoon now, the sun lower in the sky, painting everything in shades of amber and gold.

"I should get back to work," Lego said reluctantly. "P'Dao will wonder what happened to me."

"Can I see you again? Tomorrow?"

"You can see me whenever you want." His smile was radiant, uncomplicated by pain for the first time in weeks. "That's what happens when you finally ask someone on a date instead of making excuses."

"Then let me do this properly." I reached for his hand again, threading our fingers together. "Lego, will you go on a date with me? A real one. Dinner, or a movie, or whatever you want. Whatever you've been dreaming about. Let me give that to you."

"Yes." The word came without hesitation, bright and certain. "Yes, obviously yes."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow." He squeezed my hand. "But you have to let go now, because I really do need to get back to the counter before P'Dao comes looking for me."

I didn't want to let go. Every instinct was screaming to hold on, to keep him close, to make up for all the lost time in this single afternoon. But that wasn't how this worked. That wasn't how trust was built.

Love wasn't about possession. It was about choice. About choosing to return, again and again. About trusting that the other person would choose you back. So I released his hand. Stepped back. Let him move toward the greenhouse door.

"Lego." He paused, looking back.

"Thank you," I said. "For the flowers. For the tea. For waiting. For giving me another chance when I didn't deserve one." His expression softened.

"You deserved it," he said quietly. "You just didn't believe it."

And then he was gone, leaving me alone among the blooming flowers with my heart pounding and my sketchbook full of drawings and something that felt dangerously, wonderfully, terrifyingly like hope.

I stayed another hour.

The protea sketch came together in ways I couldn't have imagined before—every petal now informed by touch, every shadow by direct observation, every line by the memory of Lego's voice explaining the secrets of these impossible flowers. I drew the heliconia from four different angles. I made preliminary studies of the bird of paradise, capturing the impossible geometry of its blooms.

The work flowed in a way it hadn't in months. My hand moved with confidence, with purpose, with the particular joy that came from finally understanding what I was trying to capture. This was what had been missing—not just the direct observation of the flowers, but the presence of someone who loved them, who understood them, who could translate their secrets into words I could understand.

When I finally left, P'Dao looked at me with knowing eyes but said nothing. The shop was quiet, the day winding down toward evening. Through the window, I could see Lego helping a customer, his movements easy and professional, his smile genuine in a way it hadn't been when I first arrived.

He looked up as I passed. Our eyes met. He smiled—secret and bright and meant only for me—and something in my chest expanded to make room for all the feelings I'd finally stopped trying to suppress. I smiled back.

And walked out into the evening air, my sketchbook under my arm and my heart finally, cautiously, courageously beginning to bloom.

The protea had been right all along. You could survive in harsh conditions. You could learn to thrive where others couldn't. You could develop impossible beauty precisely because of the challenges you faced.

All you had to do was keep growing.

All you had to do was let someone add the water.

All you had to do was be brave enough to bloom.

The days after the greenhouse existed in a strange, suspended state—caught between the weight of what had finally been spoken and the frustrating reality of two lives that refused to align.—like the moment between inhaling and exhaling, like the pause between one heartbeat and the next. Everything had changed, and yet the world continued spinning at its usual pace, demanding the same attention to schedules and responsibilities and all the ordinary concerns that didn't care that my heart had been completely rearranged.

I couldn't get a proper date with Lego.

It sounds simple when I say it that way—a scheduling conflict, a logistical challenge, the kind of problem that should have been easily solved with calendars and compromise. But the reality was more complicated, more frustrating, more achingly human than that simple description could convey. Lego had classes. He had shifts at the flower shop. He had dance rehearsals that ran late into the evening, leaving him exhausted and barely able to keep his eyes open on the bus ride home. He had group projects and study sessions and all the endless demands that university placed on someone already stretched too thin.

And I had clients. I had the sleeve design that had consumed my waking hours for weeks, now finally coming together in ways I hadn't dared to hope for. I had walk-ins and consultations and the constant administrative work of keeping a business running. I had my own life, my own responsibilities, my own calendar that never seemed to have an empty space where Lego's empty spaces aligned.

We texted constantly.

Good morning messages that made my phone light up before my eyes were fully open. Photos of the flowers he was arranging, sent with captions like "This one made me think of you" and "The protea are blooming again." Late-night conversations that stretched past midnight, both of us typing through our exhaustion because we couldn't bear to say goodnight.

"I miss you." he'd write, and the words would glow on my screen like something precious, like a gift I didn't quite know how to accept.

"I miss you too." I'd write back, and it was always true, always an understatement, always inadequate for the ache that had taken up permanent residence in my chest.

But texts weren't enough. They were a bridge, a lifeline, a way to stay connected across the distance—but they weren't the same as being in the same room,

breathing the same air, watching his face change as he talked about something that excited him.

Messages sent between clients, between classes, between the thousand small demands that filled our separate days. Good morning texts that arrived before either of us was fully awake. Good night messages that glowed on our screens as we finally fell into exhausted sleep. Photographs of flowers he thought I'd want to draw. Photographs of sketches I thought he'd want to see.

The date we'd planned kept getting postponed, pushed back by the relentless machinery of real life. But we found other moments. Small ones. Stolen ones. The kind of time that had to be carved out of the chaos rather than simply scheduled.

So we found other ways.

The first time he came to my apartment for dinner, I spent three hours cleaning.

This was ridiculous, I knew. Lego had been to the studio countless times. He'd seen me at my worst—unshaven, sleep-deprived, surrounded by the chaos of a creative mind that didn't always remember to put things away. He knew what my life looked like. He'd never indicated that he cared about pristine countertops or perfectly arranged furniture.

But I cared.

I cared because this was the first time he was coming to my space specifically to see me. Not to deliver flowers. Not to visit Hong. Not because of any professional obligation or casual friendship. He was coming because I'd invited him. Because I'd said, "I'll cook for you," and he'd said yes.

I cleaned the bathroom twice. I changed my sheets even though he wouldn't see my bedroom. I bought fresh flowers—tulips, because I remembered him mentioning once that he loved their simple elegance—and arranged them in a vase on the kitchen table, then moved them to the counter, then back to the table, then gave up and left them where they were.

The cooking itself was simpler than I'd planned.

I'd originally intended to make something impressive—a complex curry, maybe, or the traditional northern dishes my grandmother had taught me. But as the afternoon wore on and my anxiety increased, I'd revised my ambitions downward. Pad kra pao. Simple. Reliable. The kind of comfort food that couldn't really go wrong as long as you didn't burn the garlic.

I didn't burn the garlic. This felt like a significant achievement.

When the knock came at my door, I was still wearing my cooking apron, my hands smelling of basil and chili and the particular combination of scents that meant home

to me. I opened the door and there he was—Lego, standing in my hallway, wearing a soft pink sweater and carrying a box that I recognized immediately.

"I brought tea," he said, his smile slightly shy in a way I'd never seen before. "I thought—you liked the jasmine one, right? I made you a new box. Different varieties this time. Some that I think you'll really love."

My throat closed up.

It was such a small thing—a box of tea, a continuation of a gift he'd given months ago. But it meant more than I knew how to express. It meant he'd been thinking about me. It meant he'd paid attention to what I liked, what I chose each morning, which flowers I reached for first. It meant he was choosing me back.

"Come in," I managed, stepping aside. "Dinner's almost ready."

We ate at my small kitchen table. The pad kra pao was good—maybe not my best work, but good enough that Lego ate two helpings and made appreciative sounds that did strange things to my composure. We talked about nothing important: his day, my day, the gossip from Hong's university, the latest drama at the flower shop.

It was ordinary. It was domestic. It was everything I hadn't known I was missing.

After dinner, we moved to the couch—my small, slightly worn couch that had never seemed particularly significant until Lego was sitting on it, his feet tucked under him, a mug of the new tea he'd brought cradled in his hands. We watched something on my laptop—a movie, I think, though I couldn't have told you the plot if my life depended on it. I was too aware of the warmth of him beside me, the way his shoulder pressed against mine, the soft sound of his breathing.

At some point, his head dropped onto my shoulder.

He'd fallen asleep. I sat there for an hour, barely moving, barely breathing, watching the movie I wasn't watching and feeling his weight against me. The trust of it—falling asleep on someone, letting yourself be that vulnerable—made something in my chest ache with a sweetness I didn't know how to name. When I finally woke him to send him home, he was disoriented, adorable, his hair pressed flat on one side and his eyes still clouded with sleep.

"M'sorry," he mumbled. "Didn't mean to..."

"Don't apologize." I brushed the hair from his forehead, a gesture so natural it surprised me. "You needed the rest."

"I need more of this." His eyes were clearer now, fixed on mine with an intensity that made my heart stutter. "More evenings like this. More of you."

"Soon," I promised. "As soon as our schedules align."

"Our schedules are stupid."

I laughed—really laughed, the kind that came from somewhere deep. "They are. But we'll figure it out."

The second dinner was easier. And the third. We developed a rhythm—not a proper date, not the movie-and-dinner romance I'd imagined, but something that felt almost more intimate. Shared meals in my small kitchen. Evenings on my couch. Conversations that stretched into the night and always ended too soon.

On the days when Lego worked late at the flower shop, I walked him home.

This wasn't strictly necessary. The route to his apartment was safe, well-lit, populated with other travelers at all hours. Bangkok was a city that never slept, and Lego had been navigating it alone since he was sixteen. He didn't need a protector. But I wanted to be there anyway. The excuse was thin enough to see through, but Lego accepted it with a smile that suggested he saw through it too and didn't mind at all.

The first time I showed up at the flower shop's closing time, P'Dao raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Lego emerged from the back room already changed out of his work clothes, his face lighting up when he saw me waiting by the door.

"You didn't have to come," he said, but he was smiling so hard it must have hurt.

"I wanted to."

"It's out of your way."

"I don't care."

The walks became ritual.

We'd leave the flower shop together, his apron discarded, his hair freed from whatever clip had been holding it back during his shift. The streets would be quiet at that hour—Bangkok's nighttime energy concentrated elsewhere, leaving pockets of peace for those who knew where to find them. We'd walk slowly, neither of us in any hurry to reach the destination that would separate us again.

Lego talked about everything on those walks. His classes, his dreams, his fears. The complicated grief of parents who had started new families and seemed to forget they had a first one. The way flowers made him feel less alone, because they needed him and he needed the purpose of their needing. The small apartment that was too big for one person but that he'd filled with soft things because soft things couldn't abandon you the way people could.

I listened. I asked questions. I told him things in return—about my grandmother's garden, about the village I missed, about the fear that had kept me locked away

from love for so long.

The conversations felt like building something. Like laying bricks, one by one, constructing a foundation that could eventually support something larger. Some nights, we'd stop for street food—noodles from a vendor who'd learned our order, sticky rice with mango from a cart that was only there on Thursdays. We'd eat sitting on the low wall outside Lego's building, shoulders touching, the city humming around us.

He told me about the wedding order that had kept him arranging roses for three hours straight. About the elderly woman who came in every Tuesday to buy orchids for her late husband's photograph. About the child who'd tugged on his apron and asked if he was a fairy, because "only fairies know how to make flowers so pretty."

He told me about his dance class, the choreography that was giving him trouble, the way his body felt when it finally got a sequence right—"like the music is moving through me instead of around me, like I'm not dancing anymore, I just am the dance."

He told me about his friends from university, about Hong's upcoming exhibition, about the way the sunset had looked from the shop window tonight—"all pink and orange, like someone had spilled paint across the sky."

Every word. Every tangent. Every small observation that most people would consider too trivial to share. I listened because his voice was becoming one of my favorite sounds in the world. Because the way he saw things—finding beauty in everyday moments, noticing the magic that most people walked past without seeing—was teaching me to see differently too.

And then I'd walk him to his door, and we'd stand there in the hallway, neither of us wanting to say goodnight. So he did.

We did this every time.

It became our ritual— Something small and consistent in the chaos of our schedules. A promise, renewed each time, that we were still choosing this. Still choosing each other.

The sleeve design came together in the second week. I'd been working on it for so long—the protea, the heliconia, the bird of paradise, all the other flowers the client had requested. But now, informed by my visits to the greenhouse, by Lego's explanations, by the direct experience of touching and turning and truly seeing these impossible blooms, the design finally felt alive.

I finished the protea first. The petals had depth now, texture, the particular shimmer that had eluded my earlier attempts. When I looked at my sketch, I could almost feel the velvet softness under my fingertips. I could almost smell the greenhouse

air, hear Lego's voice explaining how the flower got its name.

The heliconia was next—dramatic and bold, the claw-like shapes rendered in gradients of red and orange that would translate beautifully to ink. Then the bird of paradise, its impossible geometry finally making sense on paper. Then the smaller blooms, the connecting vines, the overall composition that would wrap around my client's arm from shoulder to wrist.

I created two versions.

The first was closer to her original request—traditional placement, classic composition, the flowers arranged in a cascading pattern that would age well and look elegant from every angle. The second was more experimental—playing with negative space, incorporating more movement, letting the flowers seem to grow up the arm rather than simply covering it.

When I sent them to her, my hands were shaking.

"These are my two proposals," I wrote. "Please take your time reviewing them. Let me know which direction speaks to you, and any details you'd like to adjust. This is a collaboration—I want it to reflect your vision as much as my artistry."

Her response came two hours later:

"I'm literally crying. Both of these are more beautiful than I imagined. Can we meet this week to discuss? I have some small thoughts but mostly I just want to tell you in person how perfect these are."

The relief that flooded through me was almost physical—a release of tension I hadn't fully realized I was carrying. This was the biggest project of my year. The most ambitious design I'd attempted, the most exotic flowers I'd researched, the longest process from concept to completion.

And I'd done it.

I'd grown, reached beyond my limitations, found ways to capture what I didn't know. All because Yuki had told me to find the flowers, to experience them directly. All because Lego had been patient enough to teach me.

All because I'd finally been brave enough to ask for help.

And I owed it all to a greenhouse full of flowers and a boy who had been patient enough to teach me what I needed to learn.

I sent Lego a photo of the finished design. His response was immediate:

Lego: P'Tui, it's BEAUTIFUL

Lego: The protea looks alive

Lego: Like it's actually growing on the page

Lego: I'm so proud of you

The heart emoji was back. I smiled at my phone like an idiot for far longer than was dignified.

The week ended, and a new one began. Monday arrived with a particular quality of light—softer than usual, filtered through clouds that couldn't quite decide whether to rain. I woke earlier than necessary, my body somehow aware that today was different. Today was significant.

Today was the day to say goodbye to Yuki.

I lay in bed for a long moment, staring at the ceiling, thinking about the past month. She'd arrived as a stranger—a skilled artist, yes, with a reputation that preceded her and a traditional training that showed in every line she drew, but still a stranger. Someone passing through. Someone who would leave a small mark on the studio and then disappear back into her own life, her own journey.

But a month was longer than it sounded. A month was thirty days of working side by side. Of watching her technique and absorbing lessons I hadn't known I needed. Of conversations during slow afternoons, about art and life and the particular way that tattooing connected you to people's most vulnerable moments. A month was enough time for a stranger to become something more—not a friend exactly, not yet, but something close. A colleague who understood. A teacher who gave without expecting. A presence that would leave a gap when it was gone.

I got up, showered, dressed in clothes that felt appropriate for a goodbye—nicer than my usual work attire, a nod to the significance of the day. Then I went downstairs to prepare the gift.

The farewell gift had been my idea, but everyone had contributed. I'd gathered the studio merchandise—t-shirts with our logo, stickers featuring designs we'd created over the years, keychains that had become unexpectedly popular with clients who wanted something to remember their experience by. Photographs too, printed carefully on good paper: Yuki at her station, Yuki working on a client, Yuki laughing at something Hong had said, Yuki examining my protea sketch with that thoughtful expression she wore when she was really seeing something.

Hong had added his own merchandise—shirts and prints featuring his illustrations, the same designs that were bringing him growing recognition in the art world. He'd included a handwritten note, though I hadn't read it. Some things were private.

And Est had contributed photographs. I hadn't expected his involvement, but he'd shown up last week with a folder of images—candid shots from his time around the studio, moments captured with the particular sensitivity that made his work so

compelling. Yuki in profile, light catching the traditional sleeve that covered her left arm. A detail shot of her hands at work, needle meeting skin. A quiet moment of her standing outside the studio, face turned up toward a sky that looked like hope.

"She should have these," Est had said simply. "Something to remember Thailand by, wherever she goes next."

I'd added everything to a box I'd found at a craft store—plain white cardboard that I'd decorated with stamps and drawings, trying to make the container worthy of its contents. A bow on top, bright red, festive and final. I arranged everything in the box, layering tissue paper between the items, adding a handwritten card that said everything I didn't trust myself to say out loud. Then I tied the bow—purple ribbon, because Yuki had mentioned once that it was her favorite color.

The box was ready.

I wasn't sure if I was.

The gift sat on my desk now, waiting. Like everything else this morning, waiting for the ending to arrive.

I made tea instead of coffee—the chrysanthemum this time, watching the golden flowers unfurl in water that caught the early light. I drank it slowly, savoring each sip, trying to hold onto the quiet before the storm of emotion that was coming. By the time I reached the studio, Est and Hong were already there.

They stood outside the front door, the lights still off inside, the "closed" sign still displayed. Hong had a paper bag that presumably contained food. Est was holding a cardboard tray with coffee cups—four of them, steam rising in the morning air, his camera bag slung over one shoulder as always.

"Morning." I said, joining them.

"Morning." Hong echoed. His voice was subdued, lacking its usual sharpness. He'd gotten close to Yuki over the past month—not romantically, but in the way of artists who recognized something in each other. She'd taught him things. He'd taught her things. The exchange had left both of them changed. "The sandwiches are from that place near the university," Hong said, holding up the bag. "The one Yuki liked. I thought—for her last breakfast here—"

"That's perfect," I said. "Thank you."

We stood in comfortable silence, watching the street slowly wake up around us. A vendor setting up his cart across the way. A stray cat stretching in a patch of sunlight. The ordinary morning rituals of a city that didn't know or care that today was different.

And then Yuki arrived.

She came around the corner pulling two suitcases—everything she owned reduced to what could be wheeled through airports and loaded onto planes. Her outfit was practical but stylish, dark jeans and a jacket over a simple shirt. Her traditional sleeve peeked out at the wrist, colorful against the muted tones. She stopped when she saw us waiting.

"You didn't have to come early," she said, but her voice was thick with emotion. "You didn't have to do any of this."

"Of course we did," Hong said. "You're family now. Family shows up."

Something in Yuki's expression cracked slightly—the composure she maintained so carefully, the professional distance that allowed her to move through the world without getting too attached. For a moment, she was just a person far from home, surrounded by people who cared about her. Then she smiled, and the composure reassembled itself.

"Well," she said. "If there's coffee in that tray, I might forgive you for making me emotional before I've had caffeine."

"I was too nervous to eat."

"Nervous about what? You've flown hundreds of times."

"Nervous about leaving." Yuki set down her suitcases and looked around the studio—at the chairs, the flash sheets, the small personal touches that each of us had added over the years. "This place has felt like home. More than I expected. It's hard to leave a home."

We settled around the counter together, Yuki accepting coffee and half a sandwich that she barely touched. The conversation drifted naturally—memories of the past month, moments that had stood out, inside jokes that would only make sense to the four of us.

"You've taught me so much," Hong said, his usual cool composure cracking slightly. "The way you do gradients—I never would have figured that out on my own. And the line work, the precision, the way you plan everything before you even pick up the machine—"

"You were already talented," Yuki interrupted gently. "I just helped you see what was already there."

"That's the most important kind of teaching."

She smiled, but there were tears in her eyes.

"I hope to return to Thailand," she said. "When I continue my tour—when I've seen the other places I wanted to see—I hope to come back. There's more I want to learn

here. More I want to see. More people I want to know better."

"You'll always be welcome." I said, and meant it.

Est nodded. "The door is always open. Literally. We never lock it when we're here."

"That seems like a security risk."

"Probably. But it also means friends can always walk in."

The box was waiting on the counter where I'd left it. I pushed it toward her, the purple ribbon catching the morning light.

"This is from all of us," I said. "Small things. Pieces of this place to take with you."

Yuki's hands trembled as she untied the ribbon. She lifted the lid, looking at the contents—the t-shirts and stickers, Hong's merchandise, Est's photographs. She picked up each item, examining it, her expression shifting through surprise and joy and grief and gratitude. When she got to the photographs—the studio, the city, the life she was leaving behind—the tears finally fell.

"I didn't expect—" She stopped, pressing her hand to her mouth. "I didn't expect to feel this way. I've said goodbye to so many studios, so many people. It's supposed to get easier."

"Does it?"

"No." She laughed through her tears. "It never does."

She hugged us then—Hong first, holding on longer than expected, then Est, who patted her back awkwardly in the way of someone not used to being hugged. Then me.

Her arms were strong, her grip fierce. She smelled like ink and something floral, probably a remnant of the products she used for aftercare. Against my ear, she whispered: "Take care of them. Take care of yourself. Don't be afraid to keep reaching."

"I won't." I promised.

We gathered outside to wait for her friends—the ones who would drive her to the airport, the next leg of her journey that would eventually carry her back to Japan. The morning air was warm and humid, carrying the sounds of a city waking up, traffic already building on the nearby streets.

And then Lego arrived.

He was wearing a light blue button-down shirt and shorts set, the kind of matching outfit that only he could pull off—white trim and buttons, the color complementing

his skin, the cut making him look both casual and deliberate. Long socks and black shoes. A gift bag in one hand and a pink backpack on his shoulder.

He looked beautiful. He always looked beautiful.

"Lego!" Yuki's face transformed—surprise and joy replacing the melancholy of moments before. She set down the box she'd been holding and moved toward him, crossing the studio with quick steps.

Then she did something I'd never seen her do with anyone else. She dropped her bags, opened her arms, and ran to him. They collided in the middle of the reception area—Lego nearly staggering under the impact, the gift bag threatening to spill from his arms, both of them laughing and crying simultaneously. Yuki held him tight, this tiny fierce woman embracing this tiny fierce boy, two people who had found something in each other that transcended the short time they'd known one another.

"You came," Yuki said, pulling back but keeping her hands on his shoulders. "You didn't have to—you have class—"

"Class can wait." Lego's smile was gentle. "Some things are more important."

He held out the gift bag. It was decorated with stickers—flowers, I noticed, and stars, and small handwritten hearts—the kind of personalization that only Lego would think to add. Yuki took it with trembling hands.

"What is this?"

"Open it." She did. Inside was—I couldn't quite see, but from her reaction, I could guess. Something handmade, probably. Something that Lego had put thought and care into, the way he did with everything. Yuki's composure, already fragile, shattered completely.

"You'll make me cry," she said, the tears already streaming down her face.

"That's okay. Crying is allowed." Lego reached into his backpack and pulled out another bag—smaller, plain, clearly added as an afterthought or perhaps a very deliberate addition. "These are cookies. For you to share with your friends on the way to the airport. In case anyone gets hungry."

Yuki laughed and cried at the same time. She hugged Lego again, tighter this time, her face buried against his shoulder.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

"Write to us," Lego said. "Send photos. Let us know you're okay."

"I will. I promise."

The car arrived—a modest sedan driven by friends I didn't recognize, people from

Yuki's broader network of connections in the city. She hugged each of us one more time. Hong, who was trying very hard not to cry and mostly failing. Est, who had pulled out his camera at some point and was documenting everything, his way of processing emotion. Me, who held on perhaps a beat too long because I didn't know when—if—we'd see each other again. And Lego, who whispered something to her that I couldn't hear, something that made her laugh through her tears.

"I'll be back," Yuki said, looking at all of us. "I promise. This isn't forever. It's just... for now."

"For now." Hong echoed.

She got in the car. The door closed. The engine started.

We stood on the sidewalk and watched as the car pulled away from the curb, merged into traffic, became smaller and smaller in the distance. Through the rear window, I could see her hand emerge—waving, a final goodbye, a promise that she remembered we were still watching.

I waved back.

Hong sniffed.

Lego, without saying anything, reached into his pocket and produced a small packet of tissues. He handed one to Hong with the quiet efficiency of someone who had expected this, who had come prepared.

"Thank you," Hong said, taking the tissue and pressing it to his face. He blew his nose loudly, then laughed at himself, then started crying again. "God, I hate goodbyes."

"Everyone does." Lego put a hand on his shoulder. "But at least we got to have her. At least we got to learn from her."

"Yeah." Hong blew his nose again. "Yeah, we did."

We stood there for a while longer, even after the car had disappeared completely, even after the traffic had swallowed any trace of her departure. The morning continued around us—people walking to work, shops opening, the city doing what cities do. But we were suspended in our own small bubble of grief and gratitude, processing the particular weight of someone's absence.

Est was the first to move.

"I should get to the office," he said, tucking his camera back into his bag. "The campaign has a deadline this week."

"Right." I shook myself out of my reverie. "Of course. Don't let us keep you."

"I'm glad I was here for this." He looked at each of us in turn—Hong, still dabbing at his eyes; Lego, standing close to me, his presence a comfort I didn't want to examine too closely; and me, feeling more than I wanted to admit. "It was a good goodbye. She'll remember it."

"Drive safe." Hong said.

"I'm taking the bus."

"Then... bus safe."

Est smiled—a real smile, the kind I'd been seeing more of lately. "I'll do my best." He headed down the street toward the bus stop. Hong watched him go, then turned to look at the studio behind us.

"I should open up," he said. "We have clients this afternoon."

"I'll help."

"No." Hong shook his head. "You two should... I don't know. Go get breakfast. Real breakfast, not sad goodbye breakfast. Spend some time together."

I started to protest, but Lego's hand found mine—cool and soft and impossible to ignore.

"He's right," Lego said. "When's the last time we had a whole morning?"

I couldn't remember. Our stolen dinners, our walks—they were precious, but they were fragments. Edges of time carved out from schedules that never quite aligned.

"Go," Hong said, waving us away. "I've got this. Consider it my apology for all the times I've teased you about being terrible at emotions."

"You've teased me a lot."

"Then you're owed a lot of free mornings."

We ended up at a small café near the river. It wasn't planned—we just walked, letting our feet carry us through the waking city, until we found ourselves in front of a place with outdoor seating and a view of the water. The Chao Phraya flowed past, brown and slow and eternal, carrying boats and debris and the reflected light of the morning sun.

We ordered coffee and pastries—simple things, comfort things. The table was small enough that our knees touched underneath, a point of contact that neither of us moved away from.

"That was hard," Lego said, after a long silence. "Saying goodbye to Yuki."

"It was."

"But also beautiful. The way everyone came together. The gifts, the tears, the honesty of it." He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, steam rising between his fingers. "I think goodbyes should be like that. Full of feeling. Not the polite, distant kind where everyone pretends they're not sad."

"Yuki deserved a real goodbye."

"Everyone does." Lego's eyes met mine. "When I was younger, when my parents split up and then split again to start their new families—there were no goodbyes. Just... absences. One day they were there, and then they weren't, and no one ever acknowledged that anything had changed."

I reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I mean—it's not okay, it never will be, but I've learned to live with it." He turned his hand over in mine, our palms pressing together. "That's why I wanted to be there today. To be part of a goodbye that meant something. To remind myself that not all endings are cold."

"You made it better," I said. "Being there. The cookies—"

"The cookies were Hong's idea, actually." Lego smiled. "He mentioned yesterday that he always gets hungry on long car rides. I just... implemented it."

"Of course you did."

We sat there for a long time, watching the river, holding hands across the table. The coffee grew cold and we didn't care. The pastries went half-eaten and we didn't notice. We were too busy existing in the same space, breathing the same air, making up for all the moments our schedules had stolen from us.

"I'm glad you came," I said eventually. "Not just today. All of it. The flowers, the tea, the patience. I'm glad you didn't give up on me."

"I almost did." Lego's voice was quiet. "After what I overheard at the studio. I almost convinced myself to stop trying. To accept that you didn't see me the way I wanted to be seen."

"I'm sorry—"

"No, let me finish." He squeezed my hand. "I almost gave up. But then I thought about the protea. About how it survives in harsh conditions, blooms in unlikely places. I thought maybe—maybe I could be like that. Maybe I could keep reaching, even when the soil seemed too rocky."

"And now?"

"Now I'm sitting by a river with the person I love, eating cold pastry and watching boats go by." His smile was radiant. "I think the reaching was worth it."

The person I love.

The words hung in the air between us, not quite casual, not quite accidental. He'd said it before—in the greenhouse, when everything was new and overwhelming. But this was different. This was settled. This was a statement of fact rather than a confession.

"I love you too." I said.

The words came out easier than I expected. They'd been sitting in my chest for days—maybe longer—waiting for their moment. Now that they were spoken, they felt as natural as breathing. As inevitable as flowers turning toward the sun. Lego's eyes were bright.

"Say it again."

"I love you."

"Again."

"I love you, Lego. I love your smile and your kindness and the way you see beauty everywhere. I love the tea you gave me and the cookies you bring and the way you don't give up on people even when they give you every reason to. I love—"

He leaned across the table and kissed me. It was awkward—the table between us, the angle all wrong, our coffee cups in danger of spilling. It was also perfect. His lips were warm and tasted like sugar and coffee. His hand came up to cup my cheek, gentle and certain.

When we pulled apart, a nearby table of older women was watching us with expressions that ranged from scandalized to delighted. One of them actually applauded. Lego laughed—that bright, joyful sound that I was learning to live for.

"I think we have an audience."

"Let them watch." I was still holding his hand. I wasn't planning to let go. "Let the whole city watch. I don't care."

"That's new." His smile was teasing. "The P'Tui I first met would have been mortified."

"The P'Tui you first met was an idiot who didn't know what was important."

"And now?"

"Now I know exactly what's important." I raised his hand to my lips and kissed his

knuckles, one by one. "Now I'm not letting go."

The morning stretched into afternoon. We walked along the river, bought street food from a vendor who complimented Lego's outfit, found a bench in a small park where we sat with our shoulders touching and watched children playing in the distance. Eventually, inevitably, reality intruded. Lego had class. I had a client consultation. Our stolen morning was coming to an end.

He got on the bus. I waited until it pulled away, until his face appeared in the window, until he pressed his palm against the glass in our familiar farewell. I pressed mine back.

Then the bus was gone, carrying him toward his classes and his responsibilities and his life that was gradually becoming tangled with mine.

I stood at the bus stop for a long moment, watching the space where he'd been.

The morning had started with a goodbye. With Yuki's departure, with the ache of someone leaving, with the reminder that nothing—not studios, not friendships, not the moments we cherish most—lasts forever. But it had also contained hellos. The renewed promise of what Lego and I were building. The slow, steady work of choosing each other again and again. The understanding that love wasn't a destination but a journey—a series of small moments, strung together like flowers on a vine.

The protea had taught me that survival was possible in harsh conditions. That beauty could bloom in unlikely places. That patience and resilience and courage could carry you through the rocky soil into something like flourishing. And Lego—Lego had taught me everything else.

I walked back toward the studio, toward the work that waited, toward the life I was learning to build. My heart was full of endings and beginnings, grief and gratitude, the bittersweet knowledge that everything changes and nothing is wasted.

Yuki would come back. Or she wouldn't. Either way, she'd left her mark—on the studio, on Hong's technique, on my understanding of what it meant to reach beyond your limitations. And Lego—Lego would be there. And I would be there too. And we would keep showing up, keep choosing each other, keep building something neither of us had dared to imagine alone.

That was enough. That was everything.